

The Role of Trait Emotional Intelligence in Adaptation and Achievement during the Transition to University

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Certificate of Original Authorship

I certify that the work in this thesis has not previously been submitted for a degree nor has it been submitted as part of requirements for a degree except as fully acknowledged within the text.

I also certify that the thesis has been written by me. Any help that I have received in my research work and the preparation of the thesis itself has been acknowledged. In addition, I certify that all information sources and literature used are indicated in the thesis.

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Date: 6/10/2014

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Co-Authorship and Research Output

The manuscripts presented below, which have been derived from the doctoral thesis, are the work of Harsha N. Perera in collaboration with his graduate supervisors and colleagues at USQ. In all cases, Perera was responsible for identifying the research issues, developing the research questions and concomitant hypotheses, study design, analysis of data, interpretation of results, and the drafting of manuscripts. The extent of co-authorship in all cases was the provision of valuable editorial feedback, advice on research strategies and data collection assistance. The research output from this doctoral research follows:

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Abstract

This dissertation reports on research into the role of trait emotional intelligence (TEI) in adaptation and achievement during a stressful educational transition. Hitherto, higher TEI has been linked to better adaptation and achievement across several educational contexts, including stressful educational events. However, the pathways by which TEI is associated with adaptation and achievement have received limited systematic investigation. As such, understanding of the mechanisms underlying the associations of TEI with adaptation and achievement is limited.

The present research addresses these gaps in the psychoeducational literature. Specifically, conceptual models are proposed linking TEI, social support, engagement coping, adaptation, and achievement during the typically stressful transition to university. The model specifications draw on multiple accounts of emotion, regulation and adjustment, including TEI theory, social-functional and broaden-and-build accounts of emotion, stress-buffering models of social support, expectancy-value and psychobiological models of motivation and emotion, and a novel formulation of university adjustment. Although these theoretical accounts variously emphasize different variables as focal constructs, when taken together, they provide a comprehensive picture of the possible mechanisms linking TEI with adaptation and achievement. In this regard, the research also redresses the problem of vaguely specified theoretical links currently hampering progress in the field.

In light of the findings of inconsistent TEI-achievement relations in the existing literature, the first study of the present research reports on a preliminary meta-analysis conducted to assess the validity of TEI for predicting achievement. Seventy-four effect sizes were drawn from 48 independent samples with a cumulative sample size of 10,292. A meta-analysis with random-effects weights yielded a modest-to-moderate, favorable validity coefficient for TEI ($r = .20$, 95% CI = .16–.24). The finding of a non-trivial validity coefficient not only extends prior research by clarifying the TEI-achievement relation but also serves to reinforce the present model specifications directly and indirectly linking TEI with educational achievement.

In the second study, the proposed conceptual models were tested in a sequential design with a sample of incoming undergraduate students ($N = 458$). In structural equation analyses, TEI was found to be a direct, prospective predictor of higher perceived support, the greater

use of engagement coping strategies and better mid-semester psychosocial adjustment. Furthermore, mediation analysis revealed that TEI was indirectly associated with academic and psychosocial adaptation via engagement coping and social support, respectively. TEI was also found to be indirectly associated with first-semester achievement via engagement coping and academic adaptation linked serially in a three-path mediated sequence. Notably, these direct and indirect relations were robust when controlling for the known confounding influences of neuroticism and extraversion. The empirically supported mediating processes extend the meta-analytic review and previous literature by elucidating the pathways through which TEI promotes better adaptation and achievement during a stressful educational event.

Taken together, the studies constituting the present research have provided new perspectives and a great deal of data on the role of TEI in adaptation and achievement during the university transition. The data hold implications for current understanding and extant theory bearing on TEI by not only obtaining evidence for a TEI-achievement total effect but also illuminating the mechanisms linking TEI, adaptation and achievement in an integrative framework. The data obtained also have implications for university practitioners, administrators and counselors who operate in student selection and screening contexts by identifying portals for systematic intervention on the basis of deleterious affective personality processes. On a more general level, the data hold methodological implications for researchers investigating mediation hypotheses and conducting research in a broad mean and covariance structure framework. In addition to discussing these implications for theory, practice and methodology, limitations of the studies and directions for future research are considered.